

# The Seminal Question: Who Am I?

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

What is the human being? Every culture and every age has its own answer or answers. It is a question that has vast ramifications encompassing all of life and the entire spectrum of philosophical and religious reflection. For instance, "What is the human being?" implies: "What are the basic constituents of the human being" (anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, physics), "Whence does humanity come?" (paleontology), "How has humanity progressed through the ages?" (history, archaeology), "Whither does humanity go?" (anthropology, futurology), "What is the relationship between the human being and the world?" (deep ecology), "How does the human being interact with others of its kind?" (sociology, economy), "What makes a human being tick?" (psychology), "What can go wrong with a human being?" (medicine, psychiatry, psychotherapy), "Are human beings capable of transcendence?" (metapsychology), "Is there a course of actions appropriate for human beings?" (ethics), "Is there any meaning to existence?" (philosophy), "What is the relationship between the human being and the ultimate Reality?" (metaphysics), and so on.

Thus, "What is the human being?" is the key existential question, and how we answer it involves a more or less comprehensive or a more or less articulated anthropology, cosmology, or metaphysics. "A lopsided definition of man," notes Henryk Skolimowski, "leads to innumerable consequences, some of which—later—surprise us with their save outcomes."<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, our human destiny is bound up with the destiny of the world we live in and with reality as a whole. As intelligent, meaning-seeking organisms, we straddle the material universe and, in our religious and spiritual aspirations, even seek to reach beyond the manifest cosmos.

In asking "What is the human being?", I do not mean to pose a merely abstract or, worse, rhetorical question. Rather, it is a question that holds profound personal significance for all of us. Hence my starting question implies: "Who am I?" or "Where do I stand in the midst of the complexity of human life and of life itself?" We endeavor to make sense of our existence, the world around us, and the transcendental "spaces" beyond us primarily to find answers that give meaning to our individual life, and only secondarily do we speculate on behalf of our species. In this sense, all the Big Questions are highly personal questions.

The search for meaning is endemic to our human species, as it is presumably characteristic of all intelligent life wherever it may be found in this vast universe. Intelligence, in fact, can be defined as the capacity to ask questions. Rudyard Kipling wrote the following witty poem, which states this human quality well:

I keep six honest serving-men  
(They taught me all I knew):  
Their names are What and Why and When  
And How and Where and Who.

Victor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, rightly observed that while we are motivated to realize happiness, we ought not pursue it directly.\*2 Rather, happiness manifests spontaneously when we find meaning in our life, in other words, when we have found our own answers to the Big Questions. Carl Gustav Jung emphasized that we cannot recover meaning and be truly healed unless we regain a deeply religious - that is, spiritual - outlook. Those who find themselves in an existential vacuum, sooner or later develop physical illness, which is the outer manifestation of their inner "dis-ease."

But to pose questions means to look for answers, and our answers are almost as varied as the individuals in our numerous species. One of the labels pinned on humanity is that of *homo quaerens*, the questioning being. But we might as easily call ourselves *homo respondens*, the answering being, because we have little tolerance for unanswered questions and will restlessly seek for answers.

On her death bed, Gertrude Stein asked, "What is the answer?" When no one in the room responded, she asked, "Then what is the question?" Let us recall here the famous ancient riddle of the Sphinx in Greek mythology to which only Oedipus gave the correct answer. The riddle was, "What is it that has one voice and yet becomes four-footed, two-footed, and then three-footed?" The answer is: the human being, who crawls on all fours as an infant, walks upright on two feet as an adult, and leans on a cane in old age. What the riddle of the Sphinx captures is the fact that we are a riddle to ourselves, yet have the solution within us. Obviously, Stein had not discovered that solution when facing death.

As is well known, some of the most creative intellectual innovations have been the direct product of an unexpected, original question - a question that typically contains the hidden nucleus of a surprise answer. Thus Charles Darwin was curious about the variation in certain plants and animals in South America and wondered about their origin. He pondered this subject for five years, all the while assiduously gathering information to fertilize his imagination. His ruminations led him to formulate the theory of natural selection.

Nearly a century later, in 1953, Francis Crick and James Watson announced the result of their contemplations on the question of how inheritance works. They had departed from the then popular grooves of scientific imagination, approached their subject matter obliquely, and came up with expected answers. They formulated the double-helix model of deoxyribonucleic acid, better known by its acronym DNA.

Also in the 1950s, researchers began to speculate about chemical evolution preceding biological evolution. Harold Urey and Stanley Miller's experiments (which are a form of questioning) showed that organic life could have arisen out of a soup made from ammonia, carbon, and water, suitably potentized by electrical discharges.

Darwin's theory of evolution and its neo-Darwinian derivatives have been shown to be problematic, as they cannot account for all the known facts and are even contradicted by some. Thus questioning continues in this area of investigation, and microbiologists are formulating new and perhaps more satisfactory answers.

Questions act like fertilizer on the mental level. They help answers to sprout and grow. Our civilization has handed down to us some veritable questions - the Big Questions.

These are powerful memes. The term *meme* was coined by zoologist Richard Dawkins, which he explains in his widely read book *The Selfish Gene* as “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*.”\*3 A meme can be an idea, a tune, an archetypal image, a catch phrase, a writing style, and so on. Vehicles of memes are musical records, picture galleries, books, libraries, languages, tools, gadgets, buildings, and not least entire cosmologies or ideologies.

Civilization has not only handed down to us Big Questions but also Big Answers - the various traditional belief systems, which are potent meme carriers. In bygone ages, tradition was all-powerful, and only the most intelligent members of the tribe dared question (quietly, in the privacy of their own minds) the transmitted knowledge, which was held sacred. Today, however, many people are at odds with the tradition into which they were born, and so they must find their own answers by posing the Big Questions for themselves. If our personal answers resonate with the answers of any given tradition, we can make that tradition our intellectual, emotional, and sociocultural home. But if the two sets of answers do not match sufficiently, it would be best to tread our own lonely path. I am not sure which takes greater courage and staying power: to make one's home in a tradition with which one is not in agreement on important points or to be one's own light and tradition.

The Trappist monk and popular author Thomas Merton suffered the intense struggle of someone who obviously had an enormously creative mind, strong personality, and quite independent answers and yet who chose to remain within the fold of the Catholic tradition. In more recent years, the personal tug-of-war between the Vatican and Matthew Fox, the leading proponent of creation spirituality, has become public knowledge. Fox wants to belong but at the same time does not wish to abandon his own views and refuses to be silenced. By contrast, the well-known British novelist and encyclopedist H. G. Wells demonstrated the difficulty of a life lived in separation from the religious environment in which he was brought up, struggling with his “apostasy” all his life. His inner struggle culminated in the book *Crux Ansata*, written toward the end of his life. This work is an all-out attack on the Roman Catholic Church. In a subsequent interview for the *London Literary Guide*, Wells reiterated his condemnation of the Church, saying that “it stands for everything most hostile to the mental emancipation and stimulation of mankind.”\*4

There is little support for those who try to make it on their own. A person must have incredible inner resources to go the solitary route. But some people seem destined to walk this particular razor's edge to wisdom. As long as the philosophical life flourishes, it does not matter what form it takes.

Those who do not ask themselves existential questions are either fully enlightened or asleep. The Russian spiritual teacher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, who drew much public attention in the years preceding and following World War II, particularly espoused this metaphor of sleep - a metaphor to which most gnostics are partial. He remarked:

Contemporary man is born asleep, lives asleep and dies asleep. And what *knowledge* could a sleeping man have? If you think about it and at the same time remember that sleep is the chief feature of our being, you will soon understand that if man wishes to obtain knowledge, he should first of all think about *how to awaken himself*, that is about *how to change* his being.\*5

As psychologist Charles Tart, who is an avid student of Gurdjieff's teachings, put it: ordinary individuals are asleep in a consensus trance.\*6 They do not "remember" themselves, that is, they are not continuously aware of their existence but instead become "lost" in thought, action, or simple daydreaming. They muddle along, perhaps occasionally surfacing for a few fleeting moments of lucidity. Even those who seriously ponder existential questions succumb to such dulling of awareness throughout the course of the day. But at least they seek to pierce the veil of forgetfulness by their philosophical activity. Mindfulness is crucial to the philosophical life. Without it, understanding remains merely on the intellectual level but cannot touch us at the core of our being. It is in the context of mindfulness—the cultivation of lucid self-awareness—that the philosopher creates meaning out of the overabundance of human experience.

There is no *necessary* meaning to the universe itself or to reality as such. That is not to say that the world is absolutely meaningless. For the world includes human beings, who are makers or finders of meaning. But we must recognize meaning as an intelligent creation, a conscious act of relating apparently disparate factors so as to generate the intellectual and emotional conviction that the nexus or order we have thus created is inherently appropriate and good. Therefore it is, ultimately, always the human being that stands at the event horizon of all those networks of meaning. In some cases, such as humanism, the human being stands unashamedly both at the event horizon and in the center. For this reason it is crucially important exactly what meanings we create, for they can enhance our life or diminish and even destroy it.

The most profound experience of meaningfulness coincides with the recovery of our true identity, as incarnate spiritual beings. It is then that we are made whole. The British nobel-prize-winning physicist David Bohm saw this with great clarity:

When life as a whole is harmonious, we don't have to ask for an ultimate meaning, for then life itself *is* this meaning. And if it isn't, we have to find the reason, by looking into life as a whole, which includes the source of the stream and the basic roots of consciousness and the thought process. If we do this, we will generally find that a lack of meaning in life has its root in sustained and pervasive incoherence in our thoughts, in our feelings, and in how we live, along with a self-deceptive defense of the whole process against evidence that it has serious faults.

We could say that life as a whole is grounded in the matter of the universe and also in some subtle level that we could call *spirit*, which literally means "breath or wind." We have to reach this total ground to be able to live a life that *is* its own meaning. If we take less than this sort of overall cosmic approach, the meaning we find will ultimately prove not to be a viable meaning but one that will sooner or later break down into incoherence.\*7

The question "What is a human being?" is integral to the human phenomenon as a whole. Therefore it cannot fruitfully be answered from a single perspective, such as physics, biochemistry, biology, anthropology, sociology, economics, psychology, or metaphysics. Otherwise we end up with the kind of reductionism that merely yields different forms of ideological totalitarianism. Thus, the human being is not merely a conglomeration of matter, or a chain of chemical reactions, or a gene-driven organismic machine, or an animal that plays, or *homo economicus*, or a political animal, or a self-

conscious creature, or even merely the Spirit. All reductionistic answers are partial and inherently deficient. They are failed attempts at understanding human nature.

However, there is another side to this problem. In the final analysis, *all* human answers are partial and to that extent reductionistic. We never have the total view. Hence, as mentioned earlier, each culture or age has its own answer(s) to the Big Questions. The historical reason for this lies in the different life experience, stock of knowledge, and intellectual capacity, as well as visionary ability, of the cultural leaders who express the overall mood, or what Suzanne Langer calls the “feeling” of their cultural environment, while at the same time elaborating the common knowledge framework.\*8

Today we encounter a unique situation: In our pluralistic and increasingly global civilization many such answers are in circulation. Most of them are demonstrably deficient, deriving from one or another type of reductionistic (usually scientific) orientation. Some of these answers are more widely held than others, which does not necessarily speak for their validity. Most importantly, not a single answer or response could be pointed to as a possible candidate for species-wide acceptance. There is no common unifying central image that would cement all the constituent parts - now highly fragmented - of our troubled human world. If there were one, it would be an ideological magnet that most thinking individuals, however distraught by the lack of harmony and shared meaning, would vigorously resist. A shared answer or response to life must grow out of life itself, and not merely be superimposed on it by some elitist organization or social body.

To be sure, the current lack of a shared answer or answers to the Big Questions is more a symptom than the cause of our civilizational malaise. Consequently, attempts to restore to our civilization a commonly accepted answer or guiding image are doomed to fail as long as they ignore the fact that the root-cause of our problems does not lie in the intellectual realm but in the spiritual dimension, that is, in our living relationship to Reality, or Spirit, which is the ultimate context of all of life.

We do not need another totalitarian worldview or “ism” but a shared *praxis* growing out of fundamental insights into the nature of human existence, as they have been expressed in the *philosophia perennis*. Such *praxis* would simply be a nonideological response to the undeniable fact that as human beings we have the capacity for body-transcending and mind-transcending realization. This self-transcending ability must not be confused with mere mystical experiences (though we should not avoid or exclude them either). Rather it is to be understood as a psychospiritual and somatic process of intelligent *presencing*.

I suggested earlier that intelligent life and questioning go hand in hand. It should now have become clear that I do not wish to define the human being exclusively as the “question-posing animal.” As human beings we do more than ask questions and fabricate answers to them. We also transcend the whole question-and-answer game in the “thunderous silence” of being present as that which does not appear to be confined to sensations, emotions, or thoughts. If anything, the Big Questions and our answers to them pertain to the realm of paradox, because in order to make a rounded response, we are obliged to transcend the questions and our possible answers and hence the entire mood of questioning and knowing.

Yet, also paradoxically, we need to contemplate the Big Questions so that we may, like Alice, step through the looking-glass of our own mind and recapture the tremendous humor of the eternal silence that underlies all existence. We need to ask questions and find answers, for our answers will furnish us with incipient self-understanding and world-understanding - two forms of intellectual and intuitive comprehension that can serve as the foundation for the dawning of gnosis, revealing Reality in its naked presence. Love of wisdom (philosophy) guides us to that gnosis, or wisdom. Yet, it is not the philosophical activity in itself that fulfills our deepest yearning for Reality. Rather it is wisdom that provides fulfillment, because it is coessential with Reality. The ultimate wisdom is silence itself. In his incredibly perceptive book *Fingers Pointing Toward the Sacred*, artist Frederick Franck recounts his conversation with Michiko Kimura, a young Japanese student of Zen. She made a speculative comment that, because it bears much truth, is worth relating. Michiko remarked that, possibly, questions like "Who am I?" can never be expressed in words. "The true answer," she stated, "is perhaps nothing more than the awareness of having the capacity to ask this question and it is this capacity that reveals my humanness."\*9

At the same time, of course, we desire coherent intellectual frameworks to communicate our realized presence, the eternal silence, to others. That communication is as essential to our humanness as our realization of the mind-transcending presence. Being and becoming, silence and knowledge, eternity and finitude, realization and actualization together make up our distinctly human existence. As long as we are human, we ought to treasure this life-giving polarity in our nature, and attend to both aspects with equal care. For to deny one aspect in favor of the other is to cripple ourselves and deny life the opportunity to express itself fully in and through us.

## Notes

1. H. Skolimowski, *The Participatory Mind: A New Theory of Knowledge and of the Universe* (London and New York: Penguin/Arkana Books, 1994), p. 19.
2. See V. Frankl, *The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy* (New York: New American Library, 1970).
3. R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 206.
4. See the Appendix in H. G. Wells, *Crux Ansata: An Indictment of the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Free Thought Press, 2d ed., 1953), p. 155.
5. Gurdjieff, quoted in Henri Tracol, *The Taste For Things That Are True: Essays & Talks by a Pupil of G. I. Gurdjieff* (Shaftesbury, Dorset/Rockport, MA: Element Books, 1994), pp. 80-81.
6. See C. T. Tart, *Waking Up: Overcoming the Obstacles to Human Potential* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1987).

7. D. Bohm and M. Edwards, *Changing Consciousness: Exploring the Hidden Source of the Social, Political and Environmental Crises Facing Our World* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 210.

8. See S. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970).

9. F. Franck, *Fingers Pointing Toward the Sacred: A Twentieth Century Pilgrimage on the Eastern and Western Way* (Junction City, OR: Beacon Point Press, 1994), p. 183.

This essay can be found in Georg Feuerstein's book [Lucid Waking: Mindfulness and the Spiritual Potential of Humanity](#) (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions International, 1990).

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